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THE ACTUAL FORCE OF THE FRENCH *NE*.

EVERY learner of modern French is obliged to memorize certain uses of the negative particle *ne* which seem, at least to English speakers, inconsistent and useless, and which the French themselves seldom attempt to justify, no matter how carefully they observe them.

Why should a people so linguistically self-conscious, so fond since the days of Ronsard of improving its speech, generally so exact in its expression, permit itself to say *rentrez avant qu'il ne sorte*, or, *ils sont plus riches qu'ils n'étaient hier*? Survivals these usages are, of course, from the confused way of speaking characteristic of a semi-civilized race, whose language admitted many inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Other languages show similar *bizarceries*, but the French was once remarkably full of them. Before the middle of the fifteenth century, to choose a dividing line, the negative adverb drifted into and out of subordinate clauses in a most bewildering fashion. Grammatical ruling was, of course, practically non-existent for the vernacular, and wherever confusion of thought could intrude itself the idea of negation seemed to come and go at will.

Rabelais, a little archaic in his own time, has an assortment of the inconsistencies referred to. He often omits *ne* from the subjunctive clause after an expression of fearing, as do also Calvin and Commynes—a situation in which modern French exacts its use. He occasionally has no negative in the proposition which forms the second member of a comparison. This omission is to be seen in the writings of Calvin and Commynes, the *Heptameron*, and other works of the time. On the other hand, these authors use *ne* in subordinate clauses where we should not find it in modern French. Rabelais says: *faisant défense rigoureuse qu'ils n'eussent à l'ouvrir*, etc.; and *pour les affaiser et empêcher de non soi complaindre en justice*, etc. Calvin wrote: *je vous défende ne jurer du tout*. Such examples are to be found in abundance in every book of those days.

Now, it is not at all surprising that surplus negatives should have dotted the language of Rabelais and of the men he took it from. What does astonish is that certain of these apparently illogical constructions remain as correct today, not merely admitted, but prescribed by grammarian, lexicographer, and Academy. The only obvious explanation of this phenomenon seems to be that the Frenchman of our time does not understand the adverb *ne* just as he would understand it if he considered it exactly equivalent to its etymon, the Latin *non*. For him it is a negative, of course, but he finds some shade of negation in the word less convincing than in *ne . . . pas*.

It is not necessary to dwell here upon the evolution of *ne*. Coming from *non* through the intermediate *nen*, it has no doubt, even since it assumed its present spelling, lost much of its tonic force. As a rule, in colloquial French now its vowel is rarely heard at all. As is the case with other parts of speech, notably the pronouns, it exists alongside a stronger form, *non*.

At a very early day the need of reinforcing the negative idea by some word denoting quantity, as *pas*, *mie*, *goutte*, etc.—a need due to the vivacity of a semi-barbarous people and the lack of linguistic exactitude more than to any inherent weakness in the negative particle *non* or *nen*—assisted greatly the reduction of *non* to its present insignificance. The words *pas*, *point*, *jamais*, *rien*, *personne*, *plus*, etc., soon came to be considered true negatives in themselves, and the *ne* which precedes or follows them in construction is now felt only as a necessary concomitant. More than this, to the illiterate French and to young children the *ne* has no rôle to play, *pas*, *personne*, *plus*, and the like being assumed as fully negative: *Je sais pas; j'ai vu personne; fais pas ça!* Even in the speech of the educated and in literary French these words now, when used out of regular construction, carry the idea of complete negation.

These commonplaces are introduced merely to call attention to the extent to which the centuries of use of such words have reduced the force of the particle *ne*. So great is this attenuation that, with the exception of certain stereotyped expressions which from habitual employment are known as negative, *ne* used alone

in a sentence does not convey an idea of complete negation to the French hearer. The writer has made the experiment a great number of times by uttering a sentence like *il n'aime beaucoup cela*, or, *nous ne l'avons vu*. The effect is invariably to lead to a misunderstanding or to call out the *pardon? plait-il? vous dites?*—which denote failure to understand at all. There is no doubt felt, however, as to the complete negative force of *ne* when used alone in certain expressions or with certain verbs. *Pouvoir*, *savoir*, *oser*, and *cesser* constantly appear in a negative sense with *ne* merely. We have, besides, formulas like *à Dieu ne plaise*, *à vous ne déplaît*, etc. Such expressions, and the use noted in the case of the four verbs, are no doubt survivals of the construction common at the time when *pas*, *point*, etc., were not yet felt to be necessary to the negative form. It is true that the French say *je ne saurais* or *il ne saurait* in a special sense, but apart from that usage the employment of the four verbs in question after *ne* without *pas* or *point* is much more frequent in written than in spoken French. It is noticeable, too, that in the written language of today the phrases like *à vous ne déplaît* are at least obsolescent. Let us leave, then, these few uses of *ne* as a word completely negative in itself to the category of archaisms, whose tendency is to disappear with the constant weakening of the atonic particle. The exigencies of poetry favor their employment occasionally; but it is safe to say that if such combinations when heard in colloquial style were not *familiar formulæ* they would not be understood at the present day as fully negative.

We must note that in the evolution of the French negative proposition there was a time when *pas*, *point*, etc., supplementing *ne*, had not yet become indispensable. One might add emphasis by using *pas*, but *ne* alone was equal to the task of saying *not*. At that period the negative, since called *expletive*, which appeared in subordinate clauses was frequently *ne . . . pas* or even *non . . . pas*. In our day it is only *ne*. *Tu juges mes desseins autres qu'ils ne sont pas*, writes Corneille.¹ M^{lle} de Scudéry says: *deux jours depuis que nous n'avions point vu le prince*. Molière even has this use in many places, as *vous avez plus faim*

¹ *Clitandre*, IV, 6, 1203.

que vous ne pensez pas. It was a popular use and lingers yet among the lowest class. But when, in the seventeenth century, the rules for negation became substantially what they are now, the particle *ne* (expletive) remained *alone* in such positions. There can be no doubt that *ne*, constantly waning in negative force, began to be felt as less illogical here than the fuller *ne pas* or *ne point*. It has been allowed to remain. Let us see if its retention can be justified, or at least explained, and what is the present feeling of those who use it as to its signification and value.

If we take two phrases, such as *avant qu'il ne pleuve* and *il n'y a pas d'hommes qui ne soient quelquefois malheureux*, we find that from the English standpoint the *ne* in the former must not be translated, whereas in the latter the *ne* must be given the full meaning conveyed by our word "not." This will be found true in all phrases in which *ne* appears without *pas* or other word to complete the negative sense: either *ne* has no meaning for the English translator or it has the full force of a negative. But translation is notoriously treason, and the feeling, common to all who know the relation of *ne* to Latin *non*, viz., that *ne* ought to mean "not," is by no means necessarily the feeling of the Frenchman who utters the word. Does the Frenchman, in using *ne* without *pas*, attach to it the meaning of our word "not," or does he consider it a purely superfluous word and without signification?

When the French say, *rentrez avant qu'il ne pleuve*, we cannot suppose that they feel themselves to be saying, "come in before it does *not* rain." We choose rather to assume that in such a case the *ne* must be meaningless. When, however, we take a sentence like *il n'y avait pas d'homme qui ne fût découragé*, the unmistakable negative force of the *ne* in the relative clause compels us to conclude that *ne* has yet too much power to be passed over as quite devoid of meaning in any combination of words whatever. It is of no service in the search for the true influence of *ne* when used alone to say that *avant qu'il ne pleuve* is the result of a confusion of ideas, or that the clause *qui ne fût découragé* is due to a disinclination to repeat the word *pas* of the principal clause. To the writer it seems likely that no inconsist-

ency in these two sentences is now felt by the French, for the reason that to them *ne*, when used without *pas* or other form of "complementary negative," has merely the office of suggesting a negative idea without actually positing it. To attempt an elucidation let us take the principal constructions in which *ne* appears without a "complementary negative," and let us investigate their respective meanings.

Such a sentence as *dites le lui avant qu'il ne sorte* has strictly, according to many grammarians, a purpose of prevention: "tell him so before he goes out" (*that he may not go out*). The office of *ne* is here merely to *suggest* the negative notion. Again, *ren-trez avant qu'il ne pleuve*, although a sentence which might omit the *ne*, is perfectly correct French as it stands. Here there is no chance of preventing anything. The *ne* serves to indicate the presence of another idea, viz., that *it shall not be raining when the person spoken to comes in*. In other words, the thought of the speaker is double, "come in before it rains" and "come in when it shall not yet be raining." Such an expression as *avant qu'il ne pleuve pas* would be complete confusion, but the phrase with *ne* alone is not confused nor confusing, because it contains, so to speak, but the *shadow of a negation*, not the negation itself.

The well-defined use of *ne* in clauses depending upon verbs and expressions denoting apprehension is another example of the particle's peculiar office and peculiar meaning in everyday French. We say *on craint qu'un accident ne soit arrivé*. What is really feared in this case? *Que l'accident soit arrivé*. But the hope which human nature always finds to counterbalance a fear leads to the introduction of the word *ne*. It is hoped that the accident may not have happened, and the *ne*, which does not express a complete negation, serves to indicate the existence of an idea which is in no wise contradictory of the real signification of the phrase, but which may well be coexistent with it. Here again, then, the force of *ne* is merely suggestively negative. The construction is due, if we please, to a confusion of ideas, but its toleration in modern French is due to the faint shade of a negation to which *ne* has been reduced. It seems to the writer that no refutation of this reasoning is to be found in the fact that expres-

sions of fear, dread, apprehension, and the like, *when negative themselves*, do not admit of the presence of *ne* in the dependent clause. In such cases there is no coexistent notion of hope.

It might be asked here why verbs meaning "doubt," "deny," "prevent," and "avoid" should show such differences in regard to the presence of *ne* in the dependent clause. There is no obvious answer to the question. In some cases the French has preserved the use of a word of negation in the subordinate proposition, and in others it has not. That it has preserved it at all is due to the peculiar character assumed by *ne*, which has permitted this survival, but not compelled it. As a matter of fact, *douter* when affirmative is not followed by *ne* in the dependent clause; but we must say, for instance, *ils ne doutent point que nous ne soyons riches*. Here the *ne* in the dependent part of the sentence serves merely to hint at the idea coexistent in the speaker's mind, namely, "they do not, in their doubt, believe that we are not rich." So also in the case of *nier*, we say, *je nie qu'ils soient généreux*, because the French custom is to express such a thought directly and to admit no implication. When, however, *nier* itself is taken negatively the implication due to association of ideas in pairs of opposites is seen, and *ne* appears in the dependent clause to mark its presence. *Empêcher*, "to prevent," throws light upon the question with the same revelation as to the function of the negative particle when used alone in the dependent clause: *vous empêchez que les autres ne parlent; n'empêchez pas que nos amis ne sortent*. In each example the double character which the second *ne* gives to the sentence is unmistakable. Preventing the doing of something is really compelling someone *not* to do that thing; hence the negative tinge of the second half of each phrase, which the *ne* serves to impart.

To take one more example of usage of this kind, let us notice the function of *ne* expletive with a compound past tense in expressions which have to do with lapse of time. *Il y a deux mois que je ne l'ai vu* must be turned into English either by neglecting entirely the *ne* or by making it equivalent to our word "not." We consider that we translate the sentence when we say, "It is two months since I *have seen* him," or, "I *have not seen* him

for two months," but neither of our phrases alone gives the exact force of the original. A combination of the two might do so, were it possible to combine them. In the example cited the French partly say that "there are two months that I have not seen him," but the survival in this typical formula of *ne* without a second negative word, *pas*, leaves room for the implication "two months ago I saw him, however." We may pass over the similar construction found in such a proposition as *je ne l'ai vu depuis deux mois*, as merely one more instance of the peculiar influence of *ne* in the phrase. The inference that the speaker has seen the person in question as recently as two months ago is not only permissible, as indeed it would be if the words ran *je ne l'ai pas vu depuis deux mois*, but by the absence of the "completing negative" the inference is forced into the character of an inevitable implication. *Je ne l'ai vu depuis deux mois* would be a falsehood if the speaker had not seen the person referred to two months before. *Je ne l'ai pas vu depuis deux mois* might be truth even if he had never seen him.

It is clear—for the simplest experiments will show it—that *ne* alone is not sufficient to render a proposition fully negative. Does not the single word *ne* as employed nowadays sometimes do more than make the implied affirmative admissible; i. e., does it not make such affirmative inevitable? Certainly there are cases besides the one just cited in which the *ne* unaccompanied by *pas* seems to possess that power.

To consider one of these cases, we may ask, if one might say *il n'y avait pas un homme qui ne fût pas effrayé*, why does one say *qui ne fût effrayé*? Most probably because today the presence of *ne* as it stands, unaided, in the dependent clause calls attention, as *ne . . . pas* in the same clause would not do, to the real affirmative meaning of the sentence, viz., that every man without exception was terrified—a proposition which the negative form renders more forcible.

The instances bearing on this question might be multiplied, but one or two more must suffice. The phrase *si je ne me trompe* is as common as any similar formula in modern French. Can its conservation of *ne* without *pas* be looked upon as anything more

than a purposeless survival? It seems as if the *ne* so used has a function which *ne . . . pas* would not fulfil. The expression as we have it undoubtedly means more than *si je ne me trompe pas*; its force is rather *à moins que je ne me trompe*, i. e., "unless I am mistaken (*yet I may be mistaken*).” This last thought is not to be avoided when *si je ne me trompe* is deliberately used instead of *si je ne me trompe pas*. Examples of the same use of *ne* with other verbs, after *si* introducing the same kind of a conditional clause, are to be found in recent French both spoken and written.

As another case let us notice the office of *ne* in the rhetorical question. *Que ne le dites-vous franchement?* "why do you not say so frankly?" is not equivalent to a question that requires an answer. That would be *pourquoi ne le dites-vous pas franchement?* the negative being fully expressed. The use of *ne* as an incomplete negative after the interrogative *que* seems to have been retained in order that the positive exhortation which the question implies, *dites-le franchement*, may be present as an inevitable suggestion. The sentence with *pourquoi* followed by *ne . . . pas* is an inquiry which may indicate a course of action as well as demand a reply; but *que ne le dites vous?* means, first and foremost, encouragement; secondarily and remotely, it calls perhaps for an explanation of failure to adopt the counsel offered. Here, as before, the *ne* standing alone is merely an innuendo of a negative. It not only does not exclude the inferential affirmative idea, but it would seem to compel its recognition. So, also, in *qui n'a ses défauts?* the *ne* has been unconsciously retained, without *pas*, because the intention is really to present the idea that we *all have* our failings. An inspection of the phrases given in any standard French grammar under the head of the negative adverb will serve to confirm these remarks.

To sum up, it may be said that the particle *ne*, in its steadily diminishing force as a word denoting negation, has reached a point where its presence unaided by a complementary negative word indicates the affirmation of a proposition coexistent in mental association, but not verbally formulated.

Perhaps this incomplete presentation of a phenomenon which

the writer has never seen discussed may lead to the shedding of further light by persons whose familiarity with languages other than the French has enabled them to quote analogous peculiarities. Meyer-Lübke (Vol. III, chap. 5) notes that "the distinction, so important for the Latin, between *non* and *ne*, i. e., between the simple negation and *repulsion*, was lost" in the Romance, and that *ne* Latin was replaced solely by *non*. Has not the French, by the general adoption of the type *ne . . . pas*, restored in a measure this distinction of the parent tongue, and given to *ne* the lesser office abolished in Romance?

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